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Crisis not just a game to real participants

By Roger Fontaine
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Georgetown University's prestigious Center for Strategic and International Studies threw a crisis last week — and everyone attended.

Well, nearly everyone: U. Alexis Johnson, R. James Woolsey, Thomas Moorer, Richard Helms, Edward "Shy" Meyer, Murray Weidenbaum, Raymond Garthoff, Howard K. Smith, Daniel Schorr and Marvin Kalb, to name a few.

It was a Washington handbook of power players, although they were mostly "have-beens" rather than "would-be's," as one participant wryly noted.

If it were a film, the stars would have been listed in alphabetical order. But it wasn't a movie despite the presence of ABC camera crews. It was a crisis simulation, in old-fashioned parlance, a "war game" although current practitioners prefer to call it a "war avoidance exercise."

This one featured a revolution in the Philippines, heightened tensions on the Korean peninsula, a Vietnamese invasion of Thailand, a (temporary) presidential mental collapse, a superpower confrontation, a truck-bombed U.S. embassy in Paris, and an international financial crisis. Among other things.

War games were first played by the German general staff in the 19th century, and were pioneered in this country at the Rand Corporation, the grandfather of all American-style think tanks, in the mid-1950s, and then further refined by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the 1960s.

In Israel today, they are played every three or four months at high levels to sharpen skills of Israeli policymakers. The games help spot bottlenecks and identify problems that arise in any crisis.

Unlike theoretical exercises that depend on computers, the CSIS game was a low-tech, people-and-pencil affair concentrating on "real-

istic" decision-making designed to create "a surprise free future," to quote the participants' manual.

The scenario, which took two full days to complete at the International Club, centered on a political collapse in the Philippines engineered by the New People's Army with initial help from the Soviet Union.

The play postulated that President Ferdinand Marcos was dead (from natural causes in August), and his wife, Imelda Marcos, already acting president, is running for the office. But in the weeks before the elections, the central government is ripped apart by factions while the army remains divided and uncertain in its loyalty.

Given this temptation, the Filipino communist party, with the approval of the Soviet Union and the armed help of four battalions of the New People's Army, launches a coup in Manila, capturing Mrs. Marcos, sealing off U.S. facilities including the embassy, Subic naval base and Clark airfield, and setting a people's provisional government ready to do business with the United States if Washington agrees to recognition. (If it doesn't, the new leaders will be "forced" to talk with Moscow.)

Meanwhile things aren't so hot in the Western world either.

The United States and its allies are sinking into economic recession. The international financial structure is once more tottering with debtor nations meeting in Lima seemingly on the verge of either repudiating their debts or slashing back on payments.

(Since President Reagan, in fact, was sending a real emissary to the still-alive Ferdinand Marcos on a crisis facing his government, it sounded as though the scenario was created recently. But the game's senior adviser, Robert H. Kupperman, said the script was written in May and not revised.

(Still, as former CIA Director Richard Helms observed, the experience of playing the game all day and going home to watch the Philippines again on the network news was "bizarre.")

The simulation was played with two government teams, an NSC

political-military committee and a counterpart economic group. Both were directed to estimate the situation and present recommendations to the president to deal with it.

Above them was the Control Group, known familiarly as Control. It supplied intelligence from the CIA and the State Department as well as the president (played by former Navy undersecretary James Woolsey) who dropped in on the meetings of the NSC teams when he was not giving statements to the press which lived up to its real-world reputation for bad manners and occasionally irrelevant questions.

Control was more than that, of course. It provided bad news on such adversarial forces as the Soviets, Filipino guerrillas, the press. It also represented God or nature or bum luck that produced unexpected or even the weird events that complicated the work of the NSC teams.

Control was particularly brutal the first day, piling event upon event, leaving officials crushed under a burden of fast-spreading crises which, they thought, may or may not have been orchestrated by the Soviet Union as a distraction for a major move to be launched elsewhere.

With limited and contradictory intelligence, team players were uncertain about the situation and without clear policy decisions because of fears that resources committed to one crisis might be needed

for a larger one they feared was in the making elsewhere.

Control also included the media supplying at times accurate and unflattering accounts of NSC division and paralysis, and at other times, very misleading information, and occasional disinformation, which also added to the pressure on the players.

The foreign press was especially good at getting things wrong, a mythical Dutch left-wing newspaper, in particular, was fond of quoting "reliable foreign ministry sources" on the unprecedented low state of U.S.-NATO ties as a result of Washington's inability to understand that its belligerence on the Philippine question was dragging the world to nuclear oblivion.

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In the words of one NSC team player, the game media "was a high-fidelity version of the real thing" leaving decision-makers "crawling up the walls." The make-believe president also added to the burden by badgering the teams into making quick recommendations the first day, and then leaving them with no guidance at all by lapsing into a manic depression the next.

The president's breakdown supplied the game's most tense moment. When the commander-in-chief abruptly left a meeting after rambling about the moments of despair of other leaders, the participants reacted with stunned silence.

Only slowly, and carefully did they begin the unthinkable, figuring out a way to remove a president constitutionally through the 25th Amendment. (It was found to be both vague and cumbersome.)

Meanwhile, the teams, who in fact never worked together because they could not relate their crises to each other, gradually reduced the problems to three: restoring some sort of order in the Philippines, avoiding a confrontation with the Soviets, and preventing the spread of panic in the banking system.

Did the game do any good? How real was the exercise?

Participants differed on both questions. Most thought the experience was useful. The problem, as former Undersecretary of State U. Alexis Johnson observed, is transmitting the experience of the participants to those who hold the hotseat jobs now.

Unfortunately, the participants noted, those who could use the help are too busy trying to handle the real thing to learn how to handle the real thing.

The scenario's realism, most participants agreed, passed muster although few seemed impressed with the linkage of the Filipino provisional government's repudiation of its foreign debt, a debtors' meeting in Lima, and a run on Western banks as a formula for real financial disaster.

Then too, for the old Filipino hands, it took an awful long time for the NSC team to think about finding a non-communist, non-NPA alternative in Manila.

Finally, after getting a "message" from army commander Fidel Ramos and the former opposition leader seeking help in setting up a non-communist alternative, did the group decide not to negotiate with the provisional government and begin to push the crisis to a conclusion.

The game's usefulness did not rest on how "real" the events depicted were, many agreed. The question was how real and complex were the pressures on the officials. Real enough, according to men who had been there before, noting the insufficient and contradictory information, often poor communications, and a pouncing, critical media.

Much of the realism was a result of the fact that many of the participants had been there before. Some noted that in reality high-level, crisis-management teams have staffs to do the detail work that the limited number of participants were forced to do in the game.

One participant found himself overstimulated and as a result engaged in "selective disobedience."

Some thought the game too tame by real crisis standards. Others felt the process was, in fact, more ragged than the way government actually works.

Nevertheless, the penchant for getting into micro-management as this group did in deciding which military units should be moved into the Philippines in utter neglect of broad, strategic questions (is the Philippines a vital interest of the United States?) was real enough.

Still as one member of Control observed, the game did reveal information gaps like which units in the Philippine army could be considered reliable, an important enough question in a politicized army. Such intelligence is often assumed to exist, he said, but often does not.

In any case, while the world, if not the Philippines, came out of this ersatz crisis in pretty good shape, it will be spared only a few months of ersatz peace. In January, it will be Mexico's ersatz turn.